

ASTI Submission

**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Skills**

Education and Supports Provision for Displaced Ukrainian Students

May 2022

Introduction

The arrival of over 30,000 Ukrainian refugees in Ireland, of whom 6,000 are children or young people, in the space of weeks has required a massive humanitarian response from the state. This response is, moreover, evolving as refugees continue to arrive and planning for accommodation, employment, social protection, education, health has to quickly translate into services and supports on the ground. The humanitarian disaster facing Ukrainian children is of unprecedented proportions. UNICEF has stated that nearly two-thirds of all children in Ukraine have been displaced from their homes. Clearly, the international humanitarian response will require to be immediate, sustained and have particular focus on supporting this generation of children and youth.

The ASTI, in common with the other education stakeholders, has engaged with the Department of Education on a weekly basis to ensure a rapid education response to Ukrainian families. Building on the COVID-19 response process, the stakeholders are working to share information, deliver on school places, create supportive environments and, crucially, serve as a feedback-loop to policy makers on what is happening on the ground. In this submission, the ASTI wishes to draw to highlight areas of provision and policy which require attention.

1. System response

The response of the Department of Education to the arrival in Ireland of over 6,000 students is acknowledged to be expeditious, holistic and humane. Building on the experience and planning developed during the pandemic, measures were put in place to ensure immediate access to education for Ukrainian children and young people. The network of Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) established in the 16 Education and Training Boards is already proving to be effective. The generous and resilient response of school communities is noteworthy. Schools have opened their doors and their hearts to Ukrainian families and have gone about the business of settling in these students with professionalism and empathy. This response was informed by previous experience of integrating other refugee students, students from direct provision, and unaccompanied minors. It is also noteworthy that the issues which teachers and school leaders have raised in relation to education provision for Ukrainian students are not new. Language support, special needs, teacher training, counselling and pastoral care have all been identified as under-funded by teachers and school leaders. The sudden arrival of thousands of Ukrainian students in schools over the last months is placing additional pressures on these services.

2. School capacity

To date, the issue of school capacity has not emerged in the public discourse on schooling for Ukrainian students. However, the ASTI is aware of emerging concerns in relation to schools which have waiting

lists for admission and potential conflicts with their humanitarian duty to provide access to education for refugee students. Principals have stated that many schools already have waiting lists and that if they do not follow their school admissions policy, as required under the School Admissions Act 2018, they could be open to appeals and potential legal action. Such a scenario has untold potential to feed into negative narratives about migration and refugees and must be avoided. The Department of Education must put in place an appropriate response to avert this situation as a matter of urgency.

3. Language supports

Language skills are foundational to all learning. Migrant and refugee children are typically bi-lingual and policy rightly avoids a 'deficit model' approach. Instead, supports for supporting language acquisition focus on building on students' existing knowledge and skill level. That is why having teachers appointed to as English-as-Additional-Language (EAL) posts is so important in schools. One of the most damaging decisions during austerity was Budget 2009 which reduced EAL allocation to a maximum of two per school - with alleviation for schools with large numbers of migrant and refugee students.

Teaching English-as-an-additional language is a highly professional practice. EAL teachers identify pupils requiring additional language support, assess pupils' proficiency in English using the assessment materials, devise appropriate language programmes based on the curriculum, in particular core subjects of English and maths, deliver the programmes and record and monitor pupils' progress. Classes are in small mixed-ability groups or on a one-to-one basis. Moreover, language support is not necessarily time-bound as students can still require language support as they progress from year to year and have to engage with the concomitant increase in curriculum challenge. The ASTI believes that it is time to review the current allocation model for EAL teachers to ensure stability for schools into the future and the current fast-track application process for EAL teachers must continue into the next school year.

Another fundamental weakness in the current model is the lack of a dedicated training programme to enable classroom teachers acquire EAL skills and qualifications. In fact, there is no formal qualification for EAL teaching at present. Teachers are provided with a suite of assessment and teaching resources and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (www.pdst.ie) provides guidance for guidance. However, there is no accredited training programme for EAL teaching. This gap in provision needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

4. Psychological support

A key message from the experts is that of not pathologising refugee students. All of the young people arriving in our schools have experienced significant disruption to their lives. They are facing many changes and challenges and are having to adjust to a new country, a new language, unfamiliar living arrangements. However, the very fact of arriving safely in Ireland demonstrates individual and collective resilience. All of these young people need time to settle and adapt to their new environment. The young people arriving in our schools already have a range of skills and strategies to help them cope with challenging situations so many will adjust well to their new school setting. Many will show remarkable resilience now that they are in a safer place, but for some recovery will take longer.

The National Educational Psychological Service has provided comprehensive advice to schools on how to respond to this spectrum of need. Schools are already familiar with the core principles of this advice as it informed the Service's support to schools during the pandemic. Clearly, our schools have many strengths to deliver the psychological supports required by Ukrainian students. From the ASTI's perspective, the key issue is the adequacy of current pastoral care structures in schools and of the Guidance Counselling service. The union has long called for a full restoration of middle-management posts in schools to ensure that there is sufficient leadership capacity to provide these programmes. It has also called for the allocation ratio for Guidance Counsellors to be reviewed as a matter of urgency. There are simply not enough posts in our schools to meet the developmental and career guidance needs of students.

5. Curriculum

An acknowledged strength of the second-level curriculum is the wide range of subjects offered to students. This diversity will enable Ukrainian students to study subjects which are of interest to them. It should also be noted that the Ukrainian government continues to provide a distance learning platform - National Online School – which is being used by Ukrainian students. Flexibility is the key in terms of schools best meeting Ukrainian students' needs. It is also of note that students can currently sit a Leaving Certificate examination in language not taught in the school, for example, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese. This examination is based on the syllabus developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The ASTI strongly recommends that the NCCA fast-track work on developing a similar syllabus for Ukrainian students to be in place for the state examination in 2023.

The Guidance Counselling service is very important in providing information and guidance to Ukrainian students on requirements and options for post-school education and training. There is already unsustainable pressure on this service in schools. While the number of guidance posts lost in Budget

2012 has slowly been restored, this does not take into account the new emphasis accorded to guidance in the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme. Neither does it take into account the emphasis on expanding apprenticeships and the wider FET sector for school leavers.

*<https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/latest/news/online-ed-resources-ua.htm>

6. Digital and other practical supports

One of the most practical supports the education system can provide to Ukrainian students is digital devices and free access to broadband. Having appropriate devices supports language acquisition and access to the curriculum. The provision of emergency financial support to schools to purchase digital devices during the pandemic must be continued to those schools which have Ukrainian refugees. Free access to broadband will also be critical. Schools have already identified the need to be able to provide other practical supports such as uniforms, school bags, books, etc. Currently, there is huge good will and communal effort in providing the latter. However, local charity will not be sufficient into the future. The Department of Education must ensure that existing schemes such as the Back-to-School grant and the school book grant scheme are sufficiently funded and made available to Ukrainian families.

Many schools have already identified the provision of hot school meals as a practical support for refugee children, many of whom are living in temporary accommodation with poor facilities for cooking. Currently, the School Meals Programme is targeted at DEIS schools. However, there is no automatic entitlement to funding and all applications are considered in light of the available budget for the scheme. Funding will be provided only to existing projects that have shown ongoing viability and applications must be made on an annual basis. In other words, the scheme is extremely limited. It is high time that a national policy for school meals was developed. Ireland is a shameful outlier in terms of this basic service in schools. Indeed, in this as in other areas, the sudden influx of thousands of refugee children and young people into our schools has once again exposed the deficiencies in investment.

7. Teacher registration and professional learning

The Teaching Council has developed a tailored registration process to support the registration of teachers who have qualified in Ukraine and who have been granted Temporary Protection under the EU Temporary Protection Directive. The qualifications of qualified Ukrainian applicants eligible to apply under this process will be assessed following initial registration. This assessment process is to ensure that qualifications are of a comparable standard to those achieved by graduates of accredited programmes in Ireland. Where significant differences arise, conditions are applied to the teacher's registration. The vetting and police clearance processes have also been adjusted to ensure that standards are maintained while taking account of the unique situation in Ukraine. These measures are welcomed by the ASTI which has long insisted that the Council must reduce

delays around registration process, in particular for foreign nationals, in order to address problems in teacher supply.

As noted above, Irish schools have developed expertise in opening their doors and providing quality education for migrant and refugee children. This response is characteristic of the teaching profession which has a deep ethical commitment to inclusion and care for all students. However, teachers must be supported in their work through access to good quality CPD. In the current situation, CPD on responding to trauma and on EAL-teaching is really essential and should be put in place.

8. Concluding remarks

To date, the humanitarian response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis has been a whole-of-society effort. This is something of which we are all rightly proud of. However, as we know from the pandemic, we must be mindful that such collective responses can, over time, become weakened and undermined by misleading and deliberately manipulative political narratives. Trade unions across Europe are extremely concerned about the rise of anti-immigrant, xenophobic and reactionary political forces who will use social crises to undermine the legitimacy of democratic governments and egalitarian political policies. We cannot be complacent in Ireland about wider political developments within the European Union. Getting it right in education policy is therefore important. Continued dialogue with the teaching profession is essential.